

## Review

### **Wang, Shan-shan. 2004. *An Ergative View of Thao Syntax*.**

### **Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, pp. 389\***

Since 2000, nearly thirty MA theses and Ph.D. dissertations have been dedicated to the study of Formosan languages<sup>1</sup>, among which is Wang Shan-shan's dissertation (2004) on Thao, a moribund language spoken by less than 15 speakers in two villages located near Sun Moon Lake in Nantou County. This dissertation represents one of the few recent works that provides an in-depth study on a Formosan language. It deals with two major topics: (i) the recognition of transitivity and ergativity in Thao (Chap. 2-4), as posited in Starosta (1997, 1999) and subsequent works (Liao 2004, among others), and (ii) a sketch of Thao morpho-syntax (Chap. 5). Documentation on this language comes from two major sources: (i) Blust's dictionary (2003) and (ii) fieldnotes Wang collected in the field in 2000. The first seems to have offered most of the linguistic basis for the writing of this dissertation.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first introduces the geographical and linguistic background on Thao (geographical location, genetic relationship and literature review).

The second chapter provides the theoretical foundation adopted in this work and discusses the notions of valency and transitivity with examples taken from different language families. Wang adopts Liao's (2002) revised version of Dixon's Basic Linguistic Theory, whereby four distinct core arguments are recognized, S (sole argument of a canonical intransitive verb or core argument of a dyadic intransitive verb that shares the same morphological marking as the sole argument of a canonical intransitive verb), A (more active core argument of a canonical transitive verb), O (less active core argument of a canonical transitive verb) and E (extended core argument). The recognition of these four core arguments leads to the distinction of four types of sentences that differ in terms of valency and transitivity, as illustrated in (1).

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\* I am thankful for comments from two referees, as well as from Profs. William O'Grady and Hsiu-chuan Liao. I am alone responsible for ideas expressed in this review.

<sup>1</sup> Updates on Formosan linguistic references can be found in the Formosan Language Archive, <http://formosan.sinica.edu.tw>.



topicalized, existential, possessive, negative, causative clauses, interrogative words, deictics, determiners and relative clauses).

The sixth chapter concludes the dissertation. It is followed by an appendix that contains six short texts.

Even if I do not agree with all of Wang's assumptions and generalizations, I believe that her study is quite good. The term "good" refers to different aspects in her work: it is well written, well organized and well documented. It is well organized in that sentence boundaries are used to show gaps in Chapter 3 and syntactic figures are provided to help understand the structure of each type of sentence in Chapter 5; besides, the use of bold and italic fonts draws the attention of the reader to the main points, both in the examples and in the main text. It is well documented in that the source of nearly every example is carefully indicated and the whole study offers – thanks to Blust's dictionary (2003) – abundant data.

The framework adopted in this dissertation represents a mixture of different theoretical orientations, that originate in the works of Dixon (1979 and 1994), Starosta (1988, 1997, 2004), Gibson and Starosta (1990), Dixon and Aikhenvald (2000), and Liao (2004), which all deal with ergativity and transitivity. Her two chapters on transitivity and ergativity in Thao are superbly handled, with different tests given in support of her analysis. It is unfortunate, however, that she has imposed her view on earlier works and has somehow twisted the analyses of previous scholars for the purpose of demonstrating that they are wrong (cf. Chap. 3). I believe that the question is not whether one's analysis is "right" or "wrong" but whether the theoretical framework adopted leads to the "best" analysis (S. Starosta's term).

The quality of the dissertation would have been greatly improved, if Wang had paid more attention to the typology of the Formosan languages reflected in the vast amount of literature that has flourished on that topic since the early 90's. Important references are, indeed, missing from her work. These include the brief study on the Thao PF/perfective by Blust (1998) and AF/NAF asymmetries in Seediq by Chang (1999), actor sensitivity and obligatory control by Chang and Tsai (2001) as well as all the publications related to the morpho-syntactic typology of Formosan languages (cf. Starosta 1988, Zeitoun *et al.* 1996, 1999, Zeitoun and Huang 1997, 2000, Huang *et al.* 1998, 1999a-b, Yeh *et al.* 1998 and Zeitoun 2000). I must admit that their omission is rather surprising because these references must have been accessible to Wang, as most of these are cited in Liao's (2004) dissertation (both got their Ph.D degree from the university and were supervised by the same advisor). Being more familiar with the Formosan languages would also have enabled Wang to avoid certain methodological mistakes which I will outline briefly below. Many of her observations are actually very interesting, if not original. However, Wang does not

provide minimal pairs to show the difference between different types of constructions. The reader is left to look for himself, and try to see whether the examples she provides can be used to support her statements. Some of the generalizations that she makes in her dissertation are misleading, if not incorrect. She also makes statements about the morpho-syntactic changes that she believes Thao has undergone, but she never provides any internal or external evidence to attest to the feasibility of her hypotheses. One example will suffice to illustrate my point. Wang states that “because Thao, unlike many other Formosan languages [but which one? EZ], does not have a clear nominal case-marking system that provides information about an NP’s function within a sentence, word order becomes one of the formal devices to encode its grammatical relations” (p. 173) while she postulates, without even mentioning how she reaches this conclusion, that “historically, Thao clause structure, like many other Formosan languages, was typically right-branching” (p. 174). These two assumptions are actually contradicted by the examples she provides at different places in her dissertation, cf. *yaku paruan ama* ‘Father beat me’ (p. 108, 124, 190, taken from Blust, 2003:681) vs. *paruan ama yaku* ‘Father beat me’ (p. 180, taken from Blust, 2003:681) and by her own admission that “although in verb-initial clauses the agent NP usually occurs before the theme/patient NP regardless of transitivity, this constraint can be relaxed when there is no ambiguity regarding animacy” (p. 186). It is well-known that word order in Formosan languages does not depend solely on the (non-)occurrence of case markers, but that many other factors must be taken into consideration (e.g., clause structure, focus, animacy, number of nominal arguments etc.).

In any case, these criticisms are not meant to diminish this valuable work, definitely recommended to any person interested in Formosan languages.

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